

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:6-10)

Come and Help Us!

"Come and help us!" Have you ever seen people pleading for help? After an earthquake or a hurricane, sometimes reporters interview people pleading for the world to send help. Sometimes their governments send out an urgent appeal. We've all seen the footage of ships and planes and helicopters loaded with supplies and people going to help. That is certainly a beautiful thing. But there are many other situations in which people need help, but they don't generate the headlines that an earthquake does because they're ongoing realities. And yet, you do still see commercials or ads in magazines for agencies that try to help people who live poverty or children who suffer from cancer. The world is full of situations where people need help.

I.

Those situations are real and important. We Christians should be moved to compassion by them. God repeatedly calls us in his word to help those who are in need. For that reason, in many churches today, the word of God we have before us might be used to urge people to greater efforts to help the poor and suffering. But that is not the only thing God commands us to do. In fact, it's not even the most important thing, although it is very high on the list. The vision that St. Paul saw in our text this morning was a plea for a different kind of help: spiritual help. The man was asking Paul and his mission team to come and rescue them from going to hell. That is the Church's first mission. **"Come and help us!" The world needs our help.**

The reading opens with a travelogue. Paul and his mission team were traveling through Phrygia and Galatia and they passed by Bithynia and Mysia. Despite their funny names, these were real places and you could trace their travels in the country we know today as Turkey. But for right now, we want to focus on the vision Paul saw. He saw **"a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'"** In the Bible, visions are never literally true. They always represent something. Sometimes, all kinds of impossible things happen, like in the book of Revelation. Sometimes, they're quite simple and easy to imagine, like with this particular vision. A man from Macedonia begs for help. But this wasn't a real man. The Bible never says that Paul later met him. In fact, the Bible doesn't even tell us how Paul knew he was from Macedonia. Did he dress or speak in a certain way? We don't know. And it doesn't matter because in the vision he represented the people who lived in Macedonia, the northern part of Greece.

What matters is that his people needed help. Why? Not because of a natural disaster. Later, there would be a famine in Jerusalem and Paul would collect money to buy food for the believers there, but that's not what this was about. He wasn't asking Paul to bring volunteers and heavy equipment to rescue people trapped by an earthquake or stranded by a flood. What did they need? Luke tells us: **"After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."**

They needed the gospel. The people of Macedonia, like all people everywhere, were born unbelievers. They were born slaves of sin, doomed to destruction. You and I were born in exactly the same way, but someone helped us. Our parents brought us to be baptized. Some missionary knocked on our door. Some friend asked us to come and see Jesus. However it happened, God recognized your need and my need and he sent spiritual rescue workers to pull us out of the rubble of our lives and preach the gospel to us so that we now have faith. No one was doing that yet in Macedonia. So Paul had a vision of one of them begging him to come.

Paul had to see a vision because the Macedonians themselves didn't even know how much trouble they were in. When an earthquake levels your house, you know you need help. But when someone is dead in sin and on the way to hell, they don't have a clue how much danger they're in. They think they're good people and they expect God to be happy with them. I've talked to hundreds of people about their need. Most of the time, I asked them, "If you were to die tonight, and God were to ask you why he should let you into heaven, what would you say?" You know what? I can't count the number of times people have told me that they were good people. Sometimes, they told stories of feeding the hungry and helping the poor. Sometimes, they just said that they tried to be a good person or to do more good than bad. But again and again and again, they showed that they did not understand the danger they were in.

And when I told them, sometimes, it made them angry. What did I tell them? That God's standard to get in heaven is simple: be perfect. If you're going to see *Captain America: Civil War* this weekend, it's probably going to cost you ten bucks to get in. If you get up to the ticket counter and you've only got nine, you're not getting in. You might be a whole lot closer than someone who only has fifty cents, but the price of admission is ten bucks. They're not going to let you in just because you got close. God is not going to let you into heaven just because you think you got close. His standard is perfection. You must be perfect in your words and your actions, perfect in your thoughts and your feelings, perfect for every second of every day of your life, or you're just not getting into heaven. So even if it's true that you're a good person the way we human beings look at it, the way God looks at it, every time you swore under your breath at your boss, every time you looked at a beautiful woman or a good looking guy and lusted, every time you hated that person that has treated you like scum, you sinned. The wages of sin is death and hell. We are not perfect. No one is. Unless God rescues us we are all doomed to hell.

But, of course, God did rescue us. He sent his Son Jesus Christ to be perfect in our place. The person taking the money at the ticket counter doesn't care who pays your ten bucks. So if a friend pays for you, you're getting in. Jesus paid what God demands for you. He was perfect in your place. And then he died and suffered hell itself on the cross to pay for all those sins, all the angry words and selfish actions, all the lustful and hate filled thoughts and feelings. All that we deserved to suffer, he paid. He did it because God wants all people to be saved. Trusting in what Jesus has done is the only way out of hell.

But no unbeliever ever calls our church and says, "Come over and preach the gospel to me. Come over and help me and my family know Jesus." They're unbelievers! They can't make that request! So God calls us to share the gospel with the entire world. He sends us out to person after person who doesn't think they have a problem, who expects that God owes them eternal life, if God exists at all. God could just throw up his hands and judge them according to their words and deeds and thoughts and feelings. Every single one of them is guilty and it would be totally just for him to send them all to hell. But in love, he sends us to help them. He calls his Church to spread the good news of Christ to every person on earth. Jesus died for you and your sins. Jesus died for me and my sins. Jesus paid all that we owe and he rose from the dead to tell us it's gone forever and that we will live with him for all eternity. You know that, because God helped you before you even knew you needed help. Be a part of God helping everyone else who needs it.

II.

If we had a big screen in our church, I could project a map up here and trace Paul's travels for you. Many Bibles have a map like that in back. This was Paul's second missionary journey, if you want to look it up. But I want to point out who was in control of this trip: God. At just the right time, Paul saw this vision. **"Come over and help us!" God sends us to help.**

Like most missionaries, Paul had an idea where he wanted to go. Luke tells us that Paul wanted to go to Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them enter. He says the Holy Spirit kept them from preaching the gospel in the province of Asia. Didn't those places need the gospel, too? Of course they did. But God had a plan for his church's growth, and he doesn't always let us know why he takes the gospel to this place or that place. God got Paul to the city of Troas, which is a port city way at the western end of modern day Turkey. From there, God called him to cross over into Europe. As far as we know, this was the first mission effort in Europe.

Today, God still sends missionaries out into the world. But where do we go? The WELS cannot send a missionary to every city or even every country on earth. Even in the United States, there are lots of places where we don't have churches. I'm always a little surprised that there are no WELS congregations "downriver" until you get to Flat Rock. Why not? There were some once. But those churches closed. God doesn't tell us why he does or does not open a door. Decades ago, there was a thriving German Lutheran church down on Springwells Street in Detroit. Today, their building is the home for our Spanish mission, Palabra de Vida. God works in his own time and his own way, to send the gospel where he wants it to go.

But he does send it – and he works through us and our plans, sometime giving them success, sometimes not. He sends the called workers. We're in the process of calling a new principal. It's been frustrating to hear three calls declined already. This past week, we called again. The Holy Spirit is working through that call and when he's ready, he will send us the worker God wants us to have. In another sense, God calls all of us to be a part of the work. Every dollar we give to missions and every prayer we offer for them makes us part of that work. And our membership here at Peace makes us part of the work here. Westland, Garden City, Livonia – this is our mission field. God has called us to help people here who don't know their Savior – to bring them the message of eternal life through Christ.

What is your role in doing that? We're not going to ask you to stand up here and preach a sermon. Most of you won't ever have to teach Bible class, although we do call Sunday school teachers every year. But God calls all of us to always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that we have. God calls all of us to be willing and able to help people who are in danger of hell understand how Jesus saves them. God calls all of us to encourage our members to come to church. God calls all of us to pray for our workers and for our efforts to reach out. He calls all of us to support those efforts with our offerings and our time and our talents. What do you do to accomplish our mission? Understand, teaching your children about Jesus is part of that mission. Cleaning the school so our children can learn about Jesus here is contributing to the effort. Inviting a friend to come and hear is part of the work. But what are you doing?

If the answer is little or nothing, what would God say to you today? He would say that it's just sin to do little or nothing for the cause of the gospel. But he would also say that Jesus was the only perfect Christian who ever lived. He was the only one who reached out in every situation and always did it with selfless love. His perfect work replaces our sin and failure. Jesus died and he paid for all the times we were too afraid to speak, for all the times we were too busy to help, for all the times we were too worried about our standard of living to be generous in supporting his work. Jesus died and paid for all the time we didn't even remember to pray for the work of the church – and for all the rest of the sin in our hearts and lives. His blood washes all that sin away. Then he rose to tell us we are forgiven, now and forever. He rose and we have peace in his love. He rose, and he calls us to take that message out into the world. "Come and help us!" Every unbeliever should be begging us to come, although none ever will. But we know their need. We have God's rescue. Be a part of his work. Amen.